UNIVERSITIES AS PROMOTERS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to seek and highlight some essential milestones that a university must reach during its journey of becoming an organization that supports the sustainable development of society.

Firstly, we have identified the role of universities in the knowledge-based environment. We have also analyzed the effects of main environmental factors (economic, social, cultural, technological, etc.) on universities in general, and on academics in particular.

Secondly, by studying managerial literature, we have proven that universities must integrate ideas generated at different levels into a system of excellence. In order for that to be possible, universities must be open to new ideas, not only internal ones, but also external, coming from various stakeholders in the environment. Moreover, universities must be models in this respect for all organizations in different fields of activity. A research based on questionnaires and interviews, developed on a sample of PhD students in Management and academics who teach Management, has shown that Romanian organization in general, and Romanian universities in particular, are not enough open to the new ideas of their stakeholders.

In a nutshell, we have shown that the academic who learns is the basic cell of a university that learns to become a promoter of sustainable development. Taking into account that schools and universities are the motors of a nation’s education, we think their managers could learn especially from their own teachers and academics how to integrate the school’s or university’s changes into a social system innovation. This will increase the chances for schools and universities to prepare specialists for a sustainable economy.

Keywords: universities, sustainable, development, stakeholders.

1 INTRODUCTION

According to specialists, the problem education is facing is mainly one of productivity and efficiency, in the sense of the ratio between the invested resources and the students’ performance as outputs from the system [1]. Even though the governments of many states are investing more and more in education, students’ performances did not show significant increases in the last years [1]. This problem is even more striking when education is compared with other public sectors, in which there were registered enormous increases of productivity in recent decades [1]. We think problems such as this can be solved if each school or university will try to innovate its structure, methods, procedures and activities, in order to adapt its outputs to the requirements of the knowledge-based economy. In this way, schools and universities will bring many small innovations to society, which will contribute to the “system innovation” [2] of that society.

On one hand, taking into account that schools and universities are the motors of a nation’s education, we think their managers could learn especially from their own teachers and academics how to integrate the school’s or university’s changes into a social system innovation.

On the other hand, a modern university should become an “ambidextrous” organization, that equally exploits its own capabilities and take advantage of new environmental opportunities [3]. Ambidextrous organizations get innovative ideas from multiple sources, not just employees [3]. In the same manner, universities have to be open to ideas coming from inside or outside, from various stakeholders in the environment.

2 THE UNIVERSITY IN THE KNOWLEDGE-BASED ENVIRONMENT

In order to identify the place of the university in the knowledge-based environment, we have analyzed the effects of the main environmental factors on it: economic, social, cultural, technological, and others factors.
In 1990 there were 44 higher education institutions in Romania [4]. Competition in this field has been greatly increased, as the current total number of public and private higher education institutions is 102 [5]. In this context, we appreciate that a university that owns high technology has higher chances to occupy one privileged position in the rankings. Technology has generally positive effects on the university as it increases the possibilities for intercultural collaboration, overcoming geographical distance and formal classroom hours [1].

The most important effect of the economic growth is intensifying the university-industry cooperation. There are three stages in the theoretical analyze of this double-sense influence [6]. The first stage is the university-industry collaboration formalization, the second stage is the emergence of entrepreneurial academic paradigm and the industrialization process of scientific knowledge, and the third stage is the evaluation of the factors affecting university-industry collaboration [6]. Specialists account among these factors the number and the scientific strength of the university’s researchers, respectively the scientific excellence of the university, and the geographical proximity between university and enterprises [7].

There are five dimensions of proximity that affect interactive learning and innovation in any society: cognitive, organizational, social, institutional and geographical proximity [8]. All these dimensions of proximity also affect the development of university and its relations with the environment. Looking closer to these dimensions, we notice that most of them have socio-cultural valences.

Moreover, universities exist to enhance our knowledge of the world and the people in it, and to spread this knowledge through teaching and publishing [9]. Preparing people for certain professions is only a secondary function of the universities [9]. So, the role of universities in the knowledge-based environment is a crucial one. On the other hand, there are specialists who rightly claim that political interferences can greatly damage the performance of the core tasks of universities [10]. From this perspective, we still distinguish another important role of the university nowadays, that of defending the human values and the freedom of science and knowledge.

3 INTEGRATING IDEAS INTO A SYSTEM OF EXCELLENCE

A university must integrate ideas generated at different levels into a system of excellence (Fig. 1), thus becoming a university that continuously learns. We mention here three of these levels: the administrative, educational and research level. In order for that to be possible, universities must be open to new ideas, not only internal ones, but also external, coming from various stakeholders in the environment (Fig. 1).

Universities must be models in this respect for all organizations in different fields of activity, especially to help society build a creative economy. This new type of economy is determined by the interaction between three areas: a “core” area, in which original creation occurs, an “extended sphere,” which consists of other creative and innovative actors, and a “collocated sphere”, which includes a multitude
of others organizations [11]. In our opinion, universities are in the “core” area next to the research centres. Young people, their families, student organizations, various entrepreneurs and university partners, and other members of local community are in the “extended sphere”. In the “collocated sphere” there are different cultural centres, the government, international industrial groups and many other organizations that favor creative exchanges between the “core” and the “extended sphere”.

4 SELECTIVE RESEARCH

In a research that focused on how to use creativity in Romanian organizations, we have distributed questionnaires to 50 PhD students in Management and 44 academics who teach Management. To one of the questions, we have asked for their agreement with several statements.

In the following we have selected two of those statements, one related to the degree of utilization of customer creativity in Romanian organizations (Fig. 2), and other related to how the ideas of the employees could improve the working methodology of different compartments (Fig. 3). We mention that we have chosen for the first sentence the expression of the negative situation, in which creativity (from the outside or inside of the company) is not used, precisely to provoke the most sincere answers. This sentence was: “Client’s creativity is not used in the organization”. We have used the evaluation scale between 1 point for “total agreement” and 5 points for “total disagreement” – according to Fig. 2 – because we have expected the respondents’ disagreement. But most of them have chosen the partial agreement with this sentence: 36.4% of PhD students and 52% of academics (Fig. 2).

![Figure 2. Respondents’ opinions regarding the use of clients’ creativity in Romanian organizations.](image)

Respondents’ opinions were relatively inhomogeneous, as the statistical analysis showed. For PhD students, mean was 2.320, variance 1.202, standard deviation 1.096, and homogeneity coefficient 0.473. For academics, mean was 2.591, variance 1.271, standard deviation 1.127, and homogeneity coefficient 0.435.

The second sentence was: “Methodology in an organization is more copied than created” (Fig. 3). The rating scale had the reverse order of the previous question, respectively 1 point for “total disagreement” and 5 points for “total agreement”, because we had to complete it with another value: 0 points for the answer “I don’t know”. We wanted to receive here answers close to the median of this scale, that would reflect methodological creativity, but starting from adapting some methods/tools.
already successfully used by others. Unfortunately, most of respondents checked the partial agreement with that statement, followed closely with the respondents who expressed their total agreement (Fig. 3). The mean of the PhD students’ answers was 3.360, variance was 1.868, standard deviation 1.367, and homogeneity coefficient 0.407. The mean of the academics’ answers was 3.545, variance was 2.300, standard deviation 1.517, and homogeneity coefficient 0.428.

![Bar chart showing the distribution of respondents' opinions regarding the balance between copying the working methodology and creating a new one.](chart.png)

Figure 3. Respondents’ opinions regarding the balance between copying the working methodology and creating a new one.

In order not to long the questionnaire and to start a new qualitative stage of our research, we selected afterwards ten academics and ten PhD students from respondents for a face to face or a telephonic interview. The oral question related to the answer given by respondent to each of the sentences in questionnaire was: “Does this answer fit with the situation in your university?” We have received the same answers related to the two sentences analysed above. More specifically, all ten PhD students have sustained that the situation in their universities matches exactly the answers they provided in questionnaires for organizations in general. Only eight academics have said the same thing; two of them have sustained that the situation in their universities is better than those in other organizations regarding the use of clients’ creativity and the creation of new working methods.

But the most important results of interviews were many suggestions regarding the way in which creativity can be better harness in universities and in all Romanian organizations. We mention here a few of them:

- In any organization, all the more in a university, it would be useful a “program” for abandoning the traditional methods and developing the innovative spirit.
- Teachers have always devoted their life to learning, so they could become behavioural patterns for universities’ and other organizations’ managers. Moreover, they could teach managers to become experts in the art of leadership.
- Creativity management should not only apply to the product or process, but to the entire organizational system in all its functions.
- Taking into account that academics develop the most of the universities’ researches, they should involve students more in this type of activity, along with other stakeholders in the community.
The state should allocate larger funds for lifelong learning and support young people with certain intellectual qualities, but with reduced material possibilities. Investing in schools, high schools, faculties, and in continuing teacher education is a step towards sustainable development.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Only a university that learns can be a university that teaches and prepares specialists for the new economy. The academic who learns is the basic cell of a university that learns to become a promoter of sustainable development. Taking into account that schools and universities are the motors of a nation's education, we think their managers could learn especially from their own teachers and academics how to integrate the school's or university's changes into a social system innovation. This will increase the chances for schools and universities to prepare specialists for a sustainable economy.

REFERENCES


